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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 006103

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DEPT FOR NEA/IPA AND NEA/REA

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL CONCERNED ABOUT ILLEGAL WATER WELLS ON WEST BANK

REF: TEL AVIV 6006 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Econ Counselor William Weinstein, Reasons 1.4b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Israeli officials are concerned about water wells on the West Bank that have not been approved by the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Commission. They see the illegal wells as a bad precedent for Gaza disengagement, West Bank withdrawal, and eventual negotiations on water issues with the Palestinians or neighboring countries. The MOD Water Advisor encouraged the senior security affairs reporter for the Haaretz newspaper to report and comment on the issue to highlight GOI concerns. Palestinian water officials have acknowledged the problem of uncontrolled wells tapping shared aquifers. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Israeli newspaper Haaretz published an article and a separate op-ed piece on the drilling of unauthorized wells in the northern West Bank on November 26. The article, "Water Dispute May Boil Over During Pullout," by security affairs correspondent Ze-ev Schiff, stated that hundreds of unauthorized wells have been drilled in areas from which Israel is planning withdrawal of settlements, affecting the shared Northeastern Aquifer. (Note: The wells may be near, rather than actually in Israeli-controlled settlement areas. End note).

¶3. (SBU) The article expressed concern that such drilling could increase following withdrawal of Israeli forces, and noted that new wells require permits from the Joint Water Commission. (Note: In the near-term, the GOI would retain control of former settlement areas in the West Bank, so the articles may overstate the probability of new drillings right after withdrawal. End note). Schiff said the Israeli Water Commission estimates there have been 150-260 unauthorized drillings while the General Staff puts the number as high as ¶300.

¶4. (U) In a signed Op-Ed, "A Threat to the West Bank Pullout," Schiff said that drawdowns of shared aquifers was a greater concern for Israel for West Bank withdrawals of settlements than was the case for disengagement from the Gaza Strip. He quoted Water Advisor to the Minister of Defense Noah Kinnarti as saying that a failure to control drillings in the Northeast Aquifer could affect future dealings on the larger Mountain Aquifer as well as with Syria and Lebanon on water issues.

¶5. (C) Comment: MOD Advisor Kinnarti told ESTH Officer on November 28 that he had encouraged Schiff to write about the illegal drillings, saying that Israel's credibility was at stake. Earlier, MFA Director for Water Issues told ESTH Officer that illegal wells could be a problem following disengagement from Gaza, saying that "2,000" unauthorized wells had been drilled following the 1995 Gaza-Jericho Agreement. Palestinian Water Authority Chief Nabil Sharif has acknowledged to USAID officials that uncontrolled drilling is a problem. Besides the issue of living up to commitments highlighted by Kinnarti, uncontrolled drilling draws down both the inland and Coastal aquifers, causing them to draw in brackish and sea waters, diminishing water quality for both Israelis and Palestinians.

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